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RELIGIOUS RESISTANCE: IMPERIALISM AND THE MILITARIZATION OF THE CAO
DAI, 1924-1954

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The bright, eclectic, and optimistic artwork that adorns the interior of the Tay Ninh Temple in southern Vietnam offers little evidence of Caodaism's militant roots. But in truth, this now peaceful religion has a history shadowed with nationalism, resistance, and military involvement. Founded in 1924 by Ngo Van Chieu, Caodaism is a syncretic mix of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, Christianity and other western religions. The church worships a Supreme Being who communicates primarily through the spirit world.¹ Also known by its full title "Great Way of the Third Period of Salvation," Caodaism asserts itself as the "Third Salvation" that will redeem the human ignorance of the "First" and "Second Salvations."² The First Salvation included Buddhism, Taoism, Ancestor Worship, Judaism, while the Second Salvation included Confucianism, Christianity, and Islam.

The religion gained a significant following among nationalist Vietnamese because it was a modernist injection to Vietnamese traditional religion. Many of these nationalist Cao Dai were previously employed within the French administrative system and witnessed firsthand the injustices of French rule in Vietnam. Their individual experiences collectively politicized the Cao Dai religion. Resistance developed in the shadow of its primary function as a religion. Later, the Japanese who supplanted the French in Vietnam during World War II provided weapons and training. The resistance that had developed in the shadow of the Cao Dai religion emerged as an actual military force during the Second World War. Such militancy was the product of individual responses to the French imperialism, popular support for the nationalist flavor of the religion, the

1. Sergie Blagov, *Caodaism: Vietnamese Traditionalism and Its Leap into Modernity* (Huntington: Nova Science Publishers, 2001), 1.

2. George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, ed, *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 429; "The Cao Dai," *Viet Nam Magazine*, 5, no. 3 (1972), 5.
<http://www.daotam.info/books/pdf/pdf1/TheCaoDai.pdf>.

politicizing nature of the inadequate French administrative system, and support provided by the occupying Japanese during World War II.

The nationalist undertones of the Cao Dai church appealed to many nationalist Vietnamese living under the French imperial system. The French conquest of Vietnam in 1884 precipitated various militant nationalist movements. While failures, these revolts maintained a continued spirit of resistance throughout Vietnam, often hiding in shadows of secrecy. In defeat, the Vietnamese searched for new ways to adapt and create stronger networks of opposition against the French.³ Secret societies became the preferred method of hiding, yet sustaining undercurrents of anti-French resistance. Secretive and politically active, Caodaism had loose connections to these secret societies. For example, religious tracts entitled “*Propogande de la Doctrine du Tiers-Ordre Bouddique*,” meaning “Propaganda of the Doctrine of the Third Buddhist Order” were found among items used by one of these secret societies. “Doctrine of the Third Buddhist Order” likely referred to the “Third Salvation” of Caodaism indicating an early connection between the Cao Dai and anti-imperialist secret societies.⁴

The religion quickly gained traction in southern Vietnam despite French suspicions of its nationalist tendencies. Within two years, twenty-eight Caodaists—mostly upperclass Vietnamese who had previously worked under the French administration—had signed a petition to the French Governor Le Fol requesting official recognition of their faith. Refusing recognition and worried about possible anti-French sentiment, the Le Fol urged province chiefs to carefully watch Caodaist activity.⁵ But rather than stifling the religion’s growth, Le Fol’s actions actually

3. Dutton, *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, 335-336.

4. R.B. Smith, *Pre-Communist Indochina*, Edited by Beryl Williams (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 98, 110.

5. Dean Meyers and My-Van Tran, “The Crisis of the Eighth Lunar Month: The Cao Dai, Prince Cuong De and The Japanese in 1937–1939”, *IJAPS* 2, no. 1 (May 2006), 11. <http://ijaps.usm.my/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/lunar.pdf>.

accelerated growth by increasing Caodaism's nationalist appeal. The Cao Dai church gained between ninety and 150 converts daily in the second half of 1926. By 1930, the religion had over half a million followers. By 1954, the Cao Dai church made up about one-eighth of the population of southern Vietnam.⁶

The religion's incredible growth was based not only upon its spiritual appeal, but also upon its relationship to deeper cultural tendencies of resistance. Some of the appeal was surely spiritual, including ceremonies of ritual, association with other Vietnamese religions, a missionary and sacrificial spirit, and a highly hierarchical structure.⁷ Because communist economic theory was unpopular in Vietnam during the 1930's, Caodaism's anti-communist position also influenced its growth.⁸ With its ability to revitalize traditional hierarchical relationships between landlords and tenants in southern Vietnam, it spread quickly throughout the countryside.⁹ However, the infusion of nationalism into Cao Dai doctrine was one of the most appealing factors, given the anti-French sentiment prevalent in the south. The belief that Vietnam was the location of the Third Salvation meshed with the nationalist ideology gaining traction during the early twentieth century as a response to French rule. Frustrated by both French subjugation and a long history of Chinese dominance, Caodaists believed that spiritual fervor would cause the Supreme Being to restore Vietnamese independence.¹⁰ Such nationalism

6. Victor L. Oliver, *Cao Dai Spiritism: A Study of Religion in Vietnamese Society*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 3.

7. "The Cao Dai," *Viet Nam Magazine*, 5.

8. Donald Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 86.

9. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 90.

10. "New Religion Spurs Indo-Chinese Rising," *New York Times*, February 17, 1930, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9D03E5DD1E39E43ABC4051DFB466838B629EDE>.

was better organized in the shadow of a religion which could pass under the radar or at least avoid dissolution by the government more effectively than a nationalist party organization.

Additionally, Caodaism presented a religious solution to feelings of inferiority rooted in a loss of confidence in traditional Vietnamese systems during the French colonial period. Many of those who converted perceived that Caodaism injected an acceptable amount of Western influence into the traditional religious system.¹¹ This reflected the idea that the only way to beat the Western imperialists was to westernize, as championed during the Meiji Restoration in Japan. Thus, some of the faithful believed that Caodaism's Western influences inherently advanced an anti-Western agenda of resistance. According to its doctrine, Caodaism fulfilled the scriptures of other religions, including Christianity.¹² Similar to the Judeo-Christian idea of God, they viewed the Supreme Being as the father of humankind and the creator of the universe.¹³ Figures like Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed are recognized as saints along with many other European figures including Descartes, Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, Louis Pasteur, Shakespeare, and Lenin.¹⁴ The church's hierarchical structure closely modeled the Roman Catholic Church, with an acting pope at its head. Caodaists also celebrate Western holidays such as Christmas, and practice spiritism using the "European" method of the Ouija board.¹⁵ By incorporating Western elements with Vietnamese religion, the church appealed to those Vietnamese seeking revitalization of a tired traditional system.

11. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 105.

12. Oliver, *Cao Dai Spiritism*, 7.

13. *Ibid.*, 9.

14. *Ibid.*, 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 14; Meyers, "The Crisis of the Eighth Lunar Month", 16.

The influx of believers drawn to the nationalist undertones of the Cao Dai religion politicized the church. Caodaism transitioned easily into the political sphere because of its roots in politically active religions like Taoism and Confucianism. Cao Dai political resistance against the French was particularly prevalent in southern Vietnam, where imperialist rule began a generation earlier than elsewhere.¹⁶ The French imposed their Western sense of individuality over the time-tested collective obligation of Vietnamese village culture. They removed the communal system for social programs previously controlled by village communities and instead connected it to the central colonial administration. Yet they refused to bear responsibility for it, forcing the Vietnamese to pay hefty taxes.¹⁷ Worried that religious organizations could be strong instruments of unrest and militant nationalism, they treated all non-orthodox Vietnamese religious leaders as possible agitators. French colonial insensitivity also influenced Caodaism's politicization. Of the 6,583 French officials in Vietnam in 1911, only three spoke the language.¹⁸ Many Caodaists had formerly worked in the French administration and experienced the abuses of the system firsthand.¹⁹ This left nationalist Vietnamese elites, many of whom were Cao Dai converts, feeling more fit to rule than the French.

The French response to Caodaism sheds more light upon the politicization of the church. French officials were divided on how to react to the Cao Dai religion. Some believed that it was a good alternative to communism. Others viewed it as too distant from the eyes of colonial administrators and a possible instigator of unrest. Both viewpoints turned out to be true.²⁰ Within

16. Smith, *Pre-Communist Indochina*, 108.

17. Blagov, *Caodaism*, 14.

18. *Ibid.*, 12.

19. Oliver, *Cao Dai Spiritism*, 1.

20. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 304.

six years of the religion's founding, the connection between the Cao Dai and anti-imperial resistance was globally recognized. The *New York Times* published an article describing the Cao Dai church as a source of unrest appealing to "the more intelligent portions of the population, especially natives employed in government services."²¹ Such suspicions led to the church becoming a target of French surveillance.

Early Cao Dai resistance was important in developing opposition against the French. It provided a venue for an organized group of nationalists to meet, exchange ideas, and form connections that would be important to the future of the nationalist movement. Yet it lacked enough organization to challenge the French politically.²² The Cao Dai had purpose and popular support to challenge the French, but they lacked the power to do so. Split into four rival sects with various attitudes toward violence and communism, disunity prevented them from leading effective resistance in the early 1930s.²³

Such power would eventually come from the militarization of the Cao Dai church. Even in its earlier years, the religion had a militantly defensive posture



against a perceived enemy. For example, in 1930, French officials found an armory linked to the Cao Dai that was likely to be used against the French. This militant attitude likely began with the

21. "New Religion Spurs Indo-Chinese Rising," *New York Times*, February 17, 1930. This 1930 edition of the *New York Times* describes the Cao Dai as not only a religious, but a political influence.

22. Smith, *Pre-Communist Indochina*, 98, 1 (Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries).

23. *Ibid.*, 111, 123.

founder of the religion, Ngo Van Chieu, who spent time with a Chinese sect that was dedicated to overthrowing the Manchu dynasty of China and restoring the Ming dynasty. This influenced Chieu's view of the role of religion, and Chieu set conditions for Caodaism's future militarization. Furthermore, the meaning of the term Cao Dai, "High Palace," is associated with the idea of the restoration of the monarchy and is a natural link to the idea of religious resistance to imperialism. One Cao Dai scripture from 1926 reads, "I have placed many ferocious beasts among you and ordered them to devour you. But I also have given each of you the armor to protect yourself."²⁴ The Cao Dai were prepared to defend themselves against these "ferocious beasts" by more than just spiritual means. Given the context of French occupation and their imperialist abuses, it was easy for the Cao Dai to perceive the French government as one of the beasts sent to devour them.

While Caodaism had early militant roots, the final instigator of militarization was hegemonic Japanese influence. A Cao Dai prophesy indicated that a future Japanese invasion of Indochina during a worldwide war would end with Japanese liberation of Vietnam. A poem read by many Caodaists during this era read "The stars Khoi and Khue (France and England) are on the decline in Asia... Who will assist in reconquering the Nation's independence... We must rely on Japan and Italy to reconquer the country."²⁵ As the Japanese began to expand in Asia, the Cao Dai therefore aligned themselves with the Japanese and increased their resistance against the French. Believers looked forward to Japanese rule to fulfill the prophesy of Vietnamese independence. At the same time, beginning in 1938, Japan actively encouraged the Cao Dai to

24. Dutton, *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, 433.

25. Meyers, "The Crisis of the Eighth Lunar Month", 30.

resist French rule in Vietnam in 1938. Japanese officials hoped this would coerce the French into ending their supply of war materials to China through Vietnam.²⁶

In an attempt to counter rising Vietnamese nationalism, the French encouraged the Vietnamese to enlist in their forces. However, the church encouraged followers to come to its main temple at Tay Ninh and join an armed Cao Dai force instead. Church leaders developed plans to convert the Tay Ninh temple into a guarded militia citadel and send certain church members to Japan to discuss their participation in the Vietnamese government after Japan took control. They even painted swastikas on their roofs to avoid Axis bombing. The French saw this consolidation of Cao Dai power as an attempt, on the part of the Cao Dai, to forge their own state. In response, the French occupied Cao Dai headquarters at Tay Ninh and exiled their pope and other church leaders just before Japanese invasion in 1941.²⁸

Quickly seizing control, the Japanese removed French influence and installed a weak Vietnamese government.³⁰ In the absence of the French, the resistance that had developed in the shadows of the Cao Dai church came fully to light, and the formal Cao Dai military machine began to develop.³¹ Seeking the fulfillment of the prophecies predicting the Japanese role in restoring Vietnamese independence, the Cao Dai became auxiliaries of the Japanese army,

26. Ibid 1-10, 16, 18, 30-31, 37.

27. Harrison Forman, *Harrison Forman Vietnam Collection*, Photograph Collection, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Harrison Forman Collection, Black-and-white negatives, <http://collections.lib.uwm.edu/cdm/search/collection/agsphoto/searchterm/Harrison%20Forman%20Collection%20-%20Vietnam/mode/exact/page/2>

28. Meyers, "The Crisis of the Eighth Lunar Month," 1-10, 16, 18, 30-31, 37.

29. Forman, *Vietnam Collection*.

30. Hans Antlöv and Stein Tønnesson, ed, *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism, 1930-1957* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1995), 180.

31. Forman, *Vietnam Collection*; Smith, *Pre-Communist Indochina*, 117.

formally establishing their own army in 1943.³² Throughout World War II, the Japanese trained and armed the Cao Dai.³³ Many men avoided military service by enrolling instead in the Cao Dai paramilitary force. The Cao Dai militia was prepared both to collect deserters and prevent a census that would allow for French conscription of Vietnamese in the Tay Ninh area.³⁴

Although effectively subservient to the Japanese army, the Cao Dai clearly had plans to translate their militarization into future political power. At Tay Ninh, the Cao Dai maintained an independent army over twenty thousand soldiers strong. According to photographer Harrison Forman, their “weapons may not be very good, but their [sic] training and the fighting spirit of these deeply religious troops, under the capable leadership of General Ngyuyen-Van-Thanh, are of the very best.”³⁵ Along with their military, the Cao Dai also had their own courts, schools, and welfare system. They also had extensive plans for a major city to be built around their central temple at Tay Ninh.³⁶ But such hopes and plans did not materialize.

While prominent in the political system, the Cao Dai failed to fill the power vacuum that developed after the collapse of Japanese rule in Vietnam. Their efforts were hindered by competition with the many other military forces in Vietnam such as the Hoa Hao, Dong Minh Hoi, and other noncommunist nationalists. Relationships between these groups were ambiguous, often in opposition, with each hoping for an independent Vietnam under its own control. This

32. Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina*, 88.

33. Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 191.

34. Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina*, 233.

35. Forman, *Vietnam Collection*.

36. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 214-215.

37. Forman, *Vietnam Collection*.

caused the major nationalist forces to frequently shift loyalties and view each other as opponents, rather than as groups united by a common nationalist cause.³⁸

As a result, the French took advantage of the power vacuum and reestablished a puppet government under de facto ruler, Bao Dai. The French-sponsored ruler was disliked by many. To reinforce his rule, pro-Japanese sects like the Cao Dai were recruited to create a base of support for national unity under Bao Dai. His was a puppet regime, used by the French to retain their power in Vietnam by amalgamating many non-communist groups such as the Cao Dai under one Vietnamese ruler whom they controlled. The French had hoped that this heterogeneous base of support would provide diverse resistance to communism in Vietnam.³⁹ However, it ended up doing the reverse. The inability to truly unite non-communist forces under a Vietnamese ruler made such forces utterly ineffective.⁴⁰

The origins of the Cao Dai religion blended traditional Vietnamese and Western thought in an era when the importance of both were widely contested among the Vietnamese people. The imperial context of the period during which Caodaism was established begged for the politicization and militarization of the sect. Some have argued that the Cao Dai movement was merely a nationalist political movement under the guise of cheap religion.⁴¹ This is an inaccurate assertion. Caodaism thrives today as a nonpolitical, spiritual entity in Vietnam, where it now boasts over 1,300 temples and at least 1.1 million followers as Vietnam's largest homegrown

38. Antlöv *Imperial Policy*, 181, 131-133; Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 180, 191, 197; Oliver, *Cao Dai Spiritism*, 3.

39. Antlöv and Tønnesson, *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism, 1930-1957*, 247-250, 256.

40. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 191; Antlöv and Tønnesson, *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism, 1930-1957*, 181.

41. Smith, *Pre-Communist Indochina*, 115.

religion.⁴² But Caodaism's roots were not only spiritual, but also political and militantly nationalist. Caodaism was founded during Vietnam's French colonial period, during which anti-imperial resistance hid in the shadows of Caodaism's early doctrine and traditions. As a result of widespread support for the nationalist elements of Cao Dai doctrine, a sense of purpose provided by the politicization of the faith, and the military means and motivation provided by Japanese influence and support, Caodaism became a nationalist means of resisting imperialism.

42. *Vietnam Diplomatic Handbook*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: International Business, 2008), 197. Kit Gillet, "Where the Faithful Worship Among the Tourists," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/13/travel/in-vietnam-the-cao-dai-temple-mixes-religions-and-styles.html>; Patricia W Bierderman, "Cao Dai Fuses Great Faiths of the World," *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 2006, <http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jan/07/local/me-beliefs7>. Caodaism continues to flourish around the world. In California, 20 churches serve over 25,000 Caodaists.

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